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A Resort Reboot

Facing a new economy, general manager **Peter Humig** has redefined luxury at the **Four Seasons Resort and Residences Whistler**

By Matt Alderton

The 2010 Winter Olympics were supposed to change everything. Like most other resort destinations across North America, the town of Whistler, British Columbia, was limping, having been kneecapped by the Great Recession. During the subsequent epidemic of anxiety and austerity, many people fled not only the stock market but also the ski slopes, cancelling their annual vacations en masse and reducing attendance in Whistler to just 820,000 in the 2008/2009 winter season, compared to 940,000 two years prior. The Olympics, Whistler hoped, would heal the economic wounds that still festered.

And they did. Sort of. Although more than two million spectators, athletes, officials, volunteers, and reporters attended the Olympics, infusing the Vancouver area with capital, not all of them stayed in Whistler. And even fewer stayed in its most expensive resort, the Four Seasons Resort and Residences Whistler, which opened in 2004 and is Canada's only AAA Five-Diamond resort.



"In 2010, we hosted the Olympics, but it backfired," says Peter Humig, the resort's general manager. "When you have an Olympic event in your town or village, it actually scares people away because everyone knows you can't navigate. The streets are closed, everything's full, and everything's expensive. So, many people avoid it."

For the Four Seasons, it was yet another disappointment in the midst of several bad years. So when Humig became general manager in 2012, he knew something needed to change.

"When I arrived, the hotel was at the tail end of a very difficult time," Humig says. "They'd had four soft years, and the market was just starting to come back. I realized that the most important thing was to rebuild the hotel to what it used to be—but in a different way, because the luxury market has changed. There are still wealthy people, but they've become very picky and are no longer willing to spend \$1,000 a night for average service."

Maybe not for average service, but certainly for unique service, which is why Humig spent his first days at the resort brainstorming new programs that would differentiate the Four Seasons Resort Whistler not only from neighbouring resorts but also from other Four Seasons resorts, including those in other ski destinations such as Jackson Hole and Vail. "Our key initiative for my first three months was putting together an action plan that allowed us to focus on the key ingredients that would make a customer book us over a competitor—especially knowing that, in most cases, we're more expensive than anybody else," says Humig, adding that he has since developed ideas for both group and leisure travellers.

For groups, Humig is most proud of the resort's "modified buyout" program, which allows smaller corporate groups to take over the entire hotel at a fraction of the usual cost. "We have roughly 300 rooms," Humig explains. "In the off-season, which is April, May, the second half of September, October, and November, we allow you to take the entire hotel if you have 100 rooms or more. We open all the doors, and you can pick any room you want. If you want to have breakfast at the pool at 2 a.m., we'll do that for you. If you want to have a dance party at the restaurant at 4 p.m., we'll do that for you. You own the hotel."



Other hotels that offer buyouts typically require groups to book—and fill—every guest room. At the Four Seasons Resort Whistler, however, groups can reserve the entire hotel even if they're only filling one-third of it. "It allows the customer to turn the hotel into something that suits them at a fraction of the cost because we don't mandate that they have to have the full hotel," Humig says. "From a monetary perspective, it's extremely lucrative for them. And for us, it fills the shoulder months, where traditionally we are very, very slow."

Smaller groups—those of 40–50 people—can enjoy equally unique experiences such as a golf reception atop the glacier on Mount Currie, which includes a helicopter ride to and from the glacier, an outdoor barbecue, bar service, and a tee-off with biodegradable golf balls. "We call it the highest tee-off in the world," Humig says.

The resort's biggest differentiator, though, is its customization initiative, whereby hotel staff customize the resort's amenities to suit individual guests. When Whistler recently hosted an Ironman Canada event, for instance, the resort consulted athletes who'd competed in previous Ironman events as well as a professional sports nutritionist to ask about competitors' diets and caloric intakes. In response, staff created customized menus and offered special programs such as pre- and postcompetition stretching clinics. "All of our employees wore a T-shirt that said 'Good Luck' before the event and a different T-shirt that said 'Congratulations' after the event," Humig says. "All of the athletes said it was incredible because it made them feel special."

The staff makes everyday vacationers feel special, too. Kids are treated to bathrobes, slippers, and personalized cookies, and skiers can pay for the service of a ski concierge, who outfits them with ski equipment and clothing to use during their stay, saving them the trouble and expense of travelling with gear. "What we do really well is attention to detail and personalized service," Humig says.



Offering not just luxury but personalized luxury has paid off: in the third quarter of 2013, the Four Seasons Resort Whistler was on track to finish the year with the third-highest occupancy in its history. Along with the programming he has created, Humig himself deserves a lot of the credit. Born and raised in Switzerland, he grew up at a luxury ski resort where his parents were the general managers. Few people, therefore, know the product he's selling better than him.

"I'm the perfect fit for this hotel," says Humig, himself an avid skier and outdoorsman. "When you have a general manager who's passionate about the locale he lives in, the staff gets excited about it. When the staff's excited, the guest is excited. And when the guest is excited, that's when they come back."

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